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A MAGTF SOLUTION FOR MARSOC

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Executive Summary

Title: A MAGTF Solution for MARSOC

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Thesis: This study seeks to demonstrate that the strength of a Marine Corps force contribution to USSOCOM is not in the duplication of existing Special Operations Forces (SOF) structure and capabilities, but in the development and employment of a force that is based upon the unique strengths of time-tested applied Marine warfighting doctrine and philosophy, specifically, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF).

Discussion: Since the successful integration and employment of the original combined-arms air-ground team concept in WWII, the Marine Corps has realized a high degree of operational success in the employment of the tactically flexible MAGTF. The MAGTF is how Marine Corps' maneuver warfare doctrine translates into practical application on the battlefield. This uniquely Marine attribute complements the uniquely SOF doctrine, which is focused largely on the development of highly-skilled, trained, experienced, and thoroughly vetted personnel. Historical examples of early and recent SOF operations indicate the potential for greater degrees of success with the application of MAGTF doctrine. As a result of DOD direction to increase cooperation between the Marine Corps and USSOCOM, the Marine Corps formed Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). Despite the solid efforts by the Marines and staff of MARSOC to close the distance between the two organizations, and to produce the most competent, capable, and relevant force possible, there remains a striking void in the current MARSOC task organization: the absence of a complete MAGTF.

Conclusion: MARSOC has made great strides towards the accomplishment of its assigned mission by organizing, training, equipping, and deploying Marine Special Operations Forces with organization and capabilities complimentary to SOF. To realize the full potential benefits for both USSOCOM and the Marine Corps; however, the Marine Corps must add an aviation component to make MARSOC a complete MAGTF.

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Preface

As a young infantry officer in command of a Force Reconnaissance Platoon, I learned a great deal about Special Operations and became acutely aware of the parochial divide between the Marine Corps and Special Operations Forces (SOF). Following my time in Force Recon, I had the unique fortune to be a part of the Marine Corps' first operational commitment to SOF, the experimental Marine Corps Special Operations Command Detachment One (MCSOCOM Det-1). While serving within the SOF community, I realized that the Marines brought a distinct and unique approach to warfighting that not only complimented SOF but also made them better. I realized, as well, that incorporating Marines into USSOCOM brought a dimension of tactical and technical exposure to the Marines that would greatly enhance our current and future capabilities.

After the successful Det-1 experiment, and the subsequent establishment of Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC), I was frustrated to see that the Marine Corps and SOF had yet to realize the full potential of the relationship by not contributing a complete Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) despite the emphatic recommendations of the Marines and leaders involved.

During the course of this research project, I have been impressed and humbled by the efforts of the professionals in MARSOC. They have truly translated concept into reality. Additionally, the tireless efforts of the faculty and staff of Marine Corps Command and Staff College have been invaluable to the development of an objective perspective. The sage advice and operational experience of my fellow students has also served to keep me honest and accurate. Finally, I am deeply indebted to my wife and family for their patience, support, and encouragement throughout the entire process.

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Introduction

On 28 October 2002, the thirty-second Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James L. Jones, announced his controversial decision to provide Marine Corps forces to US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).¹ A unique history of exclusion and service parochialism between the Marine Corps and USSOCOM made the commandant's decision contentious. In 1986 when the US Congress established USSOCOM, the Marines opted out. The Marine Corps, then under the leadership of the twenty-eighth Commandant, General Paul X. Kelley, was confident in the direction the Corps was heading with the Marine Amphibious Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MAU(SOC)) program and thought a commitment of Marine forces to the new command would reduce the Corps' flexibility as a general purpose force.² The prevailing sentiment within the Corps was that the Marines did not need a single standing organization for special operations because the Marine Corps itself was already quite capable of these types of operations, especially amphibious operations. Additionally, the idea of a unit comprised of elites did not sit well with the Marines of General Kelley's era; in their minds, all Marines were specially trained and selected, and the idea of an elite unit did not jibe with Marine values.³ Consequently, the Marine Corps did not join USSOCOM, and in the nearly twenty years between USSOCOM's inception and the thirty-second Commandant's announcement of Marine participation, the Marines and SOCOM developed very different approaches to solving unconventional warfare problems.

USSOCOM, whose forces often are referred to as Special Operations Forces (SOF), developed as the premier force for countering Irregular Warfare threats. The institution takes great pride in its people, and bases much of its doctrine on the employment of highly trained, thoroughly vetted individuals. Concurrently, the Marine Corps made its bid for success with the

development and employment of the expeditionary Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) concept. Despite the outward appearance of divergence between the two methodologies, they are complimentary and compatible. The mission of the relatively new Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) is to organize, man, train, equip, and deploy Marine Special Operations Forces in support of USSOCOM requirements.⁴ MARSOC currently accomplishes the mission by building and deploying Marine units with comparable organization and capabilities. This study seeks to demonstrate that the strength of a Marine Corps force contribution to USSOCOM is not in the duplication of existing SOF structure and capabilities but in the development and employment of a force that is based upon the unique strengths of time-tested applied Marine warfighting doctrine and philosophy: the MAGTF.

Marine Warfighting Philosophy and Doctrine

The Marine Corps' fundamental warfighting doctrine is steeped in the concept of maneuver warfare. The modern origins of maneuver warfare date to World War I when German tactical innovators cultivated decentralized mission tactics, *Auftragstaktik*, as a method for the German Army to break the bloody stalemate of trench warfare.⁵ Marine maneuver warfare doctrine, as outlined in Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication One (MCDP-1) *Warfighting*, advocates the destruction of an enemy's will to fight by the application of overwhelming combat power directed at the critical time and place. The concept of a decisive point and time on the battlefield where a focus of effort, or *Schwerpunkt*, is applied to an enemy critical vulnerability is a central tenet of Marine doctrine that also draws its lineage from early German tactical improvisations.⁶ Current Marine warfighting doctrine also emphasizes the use of Commander's Intent, mission-type orders, and the creation and exploitation of opportunities through decentralized command.⁷ This type of warfighting doctrine requires both unique organizations

for combat and specific command relationships that enable the decentralized decision-making and fluid mission tactics of maneuver warfare to be successful.

Organization for combat and command relationships are recognized by the Marine Corps as essential ingredients of a successful maneuver warfare doctrine. As early as the Pacific Campaigns of World War II, the Marines task-organized amphibious combat forces to apply combined arms and maneuver solutions to the dynamics of the amphibious assault. The Marines organized landing forces with organic fire support, aviation, and logistics assets in order to exploit tactical success rapidly. During hard fought battles, such as Tarawa and Guadalcanal, the Marine Corps learned to reduce the effects of self-induced friction caused by complicated task organizations and inter-service command relationships by streamlining the task organization for combat.⁸ They reduced unnecessary and redundant efforts and produced an uncanny combat synergy in their amphibious landing forces. These organizations stressed unity of effort and unity of command by placing all elements of the combined arms fight within a single commander's formation. This type of organization for combat further proved its merit and combat effectiveness in the subsequent battles for the Marianas and Okinawa.⁹ The lessons learned from these campaigns formed the intellectual underpinnings of the modern day MAGTF.

MAGTF Background

The idea of combining multiple warfighting disciplines in a single formation and applying a combined arms solution to battlefield problems is at the very heart of Marine warfighting philosophy and doctrine. In 1952, the U.S. Congress directed the Marine Corps to organize as an "air-ground combined arms force," resulting in the eventual institutionalization of the MAGTF.¹⁰ The MAGTF is now the "Marine Corps' principle organization for all missions across the range of military operations."¹¹ Simply described, the MAGTF is a self-contained,

task-organized, scalable, expeditionary combat force capable of projecting combined arms solutions to joint and coalition battlefield problems. The MAGTF is comprised of a Command Element (CE), a Ground Combat Element (GCE), an Aviation Combat Element (ACE), and a Combat Service Support Element (CSSE). (See Fig-1)

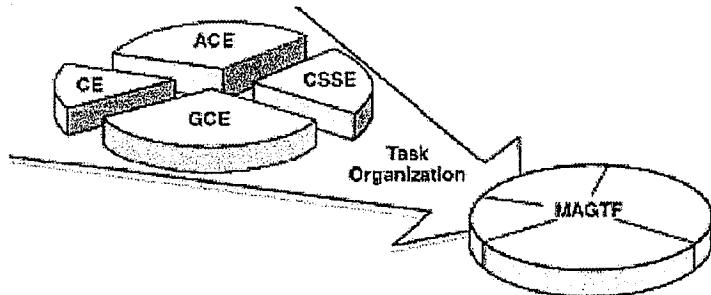


Figure – 1¹²

The components of the MAGTF forge the command relationships necessary for maneuver warfare doctrine through unification under the operational control of a single commander. Command and control of the MAGTF is accomplished within the CE. The CE is the single headquarters responsible for the synchronization of all six warfighting functions - command and control, intelligence, maneuver, fires, logistics, and force protection - within the MAGTF. The CE, like all components of the MAGTF, is scalable to the specific mission, and can expand to incorporate additional functional capability as the mission requires. Subordinate to the CE, the GCE is responsible for the projection of ground combat power. It is task-organized around a single infantry command, reinforced by comparably sized artillery and supporting ground combat assets, such as armor, combat engineers, and reconnaissance. The GCE ranges in size depending on the scope and mission of the particular MAGTF. The ACE is responsible for conducting the six functions of Marine aviation: counter-air warfare, assault support, offensive air support, air reconnaissance, electronic warfare, and control of aircraft and missiles. The ACE is similarly task-organized around a single headquarters with the appropriate

number and mix of aircraft to support the mission of the MAGTF. Finally, the CSSE is responsible for conducting the six functions of tactical logistics: supply, maintenance, transportation, health services, engineering, and other services. The CSSE is also task-organized around a single logistics headquarters, and varies in size and composition based upon the structure and needs of the MAGTF.¹³

The MAGTF concept, nevertheless, is more than a multi-disciplinary task organization as the name implies. The MAGTF concept is an ethos, a way of tactical framing and problem solving that has grown to be as much a part of Marine doctrine as the amphibious assault. It is a warfighting philosophy that produces a cumulative result much greater than the simple sum of its component parts. The MAGTF concept represents the tangible link between Marine specific maneuver warfare philosophy, doctrine, and tactical execution.¹⁴ Major General Michael Myatt, the former Commanding General of the First Marine Division, best captured the unique combat synergy of the MAGTF in the following:

I never take this air-ground team for granted. Such teamwork doesn't just happen – and it can't be legislated by Congress or created by some instruction or imposed by some edict about jointness... the result is a marvelous marriage, more powerful than the sum of the parts, where a Marine's most sought after privilege is to be able to fight for another Marine.¹⁵

The MAGTF concept is central to the way the Marine Corps mans, trains, and equips its forces. It is one of the very fibers of the Corps' strength; it is the way the Marine Corps fights.¹⁶

Marine Corps operating forces are organized around functional MAGTFs. MAGTFs range in size from a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), down to Special Purpose MAGTFs (SPMAGTF). The MAGTF represents how Marine forces are employed. From large-scale standing MEFs down to smaller SPMAGTFs that are task organized and built according to specific mission requirements, the MAGTF is how the Marine Corps maneuver warfare doctrine

translates into practical application on the battlefield. The diagram in Figure – 2 illustrates the four doctrinal MAGTFs, and highlights their respective missions and unique employment considerations. (See Fig – 2)

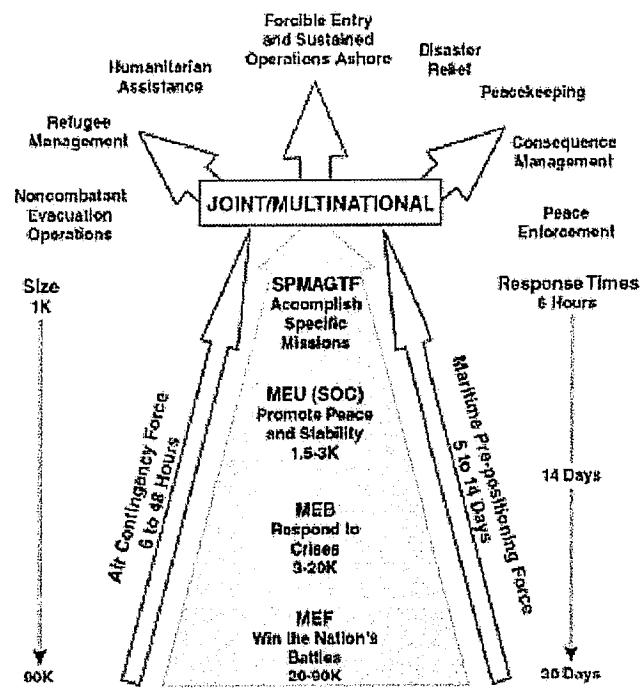


Figure – 2¹⁷

Since the successful integration and employment of the original combined arms air-ground team concept in World War II, the Marine Corps has realized a high degree of operational success in the employment of the tactically flexible MAGTF. The MAGTF's unique task-organization for combat and streamlined command structure enables a cohesive power projection of adaptable and responsive combined arms solutions to the full spectrum of joint and coalition operational requirements. Recent actions conducted by Marine forces in operations ranging from high-intensity combat to Humanitarian Assistance Operations (HAO) highlight examples of tactically capable and operationally flexible MAGTF employment. In the earliest stages of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), elements of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit Special Operations Capable (MEU(SOC)) provided immediate combined arms combat

support to the initial invasion of Afghanistan and the highly successful SOF-led actions to topple the Taliban regime. During the initial stages of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF), I-MEF (reinforced) was the primary Marine combat force fighting from Kuwait to Baghdad. Marine forces continue to organize, train, equip, and deploy as MAGTFs in support of the Combatant Commander's (COCOM) requirements in both OEF and OIF. Rounding out the examples of the full-spectrum capabilities and successful employment of the MAGTF is the MAGTF role in non-traditional missions such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). In February 2005, the 31st MEU successfully conducted critical HADR operations in Southern Leyte, Philippines, after a devastating tsunami buried villages with mudslides.¹⁸

The versatility and flexibility of the MAGTF has proven its relevance and has entrenched the concept as a pillar of Marine Corps warfighting doctrine. In his *Vision and Strategy 2025* document, the Commandant, General James T. Conway, identifies the MAGTF combined arms organization as one of the six enduring principles "that form the foundation from which Marines build their ethos and basic operating instincts." Additionally, he describes the building and deploying of "multi-capable MAGTFs" as one the ten primary objectives of the Marine Corps' strategy for the next fifteen years.¹⁹ The MAGTF represents not only current Marine warfighting doctrine but also is a driving force in the fight for the future employment and relevance of the Corps.

USSOCOM Background

While the Marine Corps focused on developing its warfighting niche with the development and employment of the MAGTF, the burgeoning USSOCOM took a different approach focused primarily on the development of highly-skilled, trained, experienced, and thoroughly-vetted personnel. Following a series of investigations and debates after the failed Iranian hostage

rescue attempt by SOF, Congress passed legislation contained in the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the subsequent Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the 1987 National Defense Authorization Act, mandating the establishment of USSOCOM as a Unified Combatant Commander (COCOM) with the additional role of recruiting, manning, training, and equipping its own forces. This legislation made USSOCOM unique, as it now had COCOM, as well as Service-like Commander responsibilities and authorities.²⁰ This unique command structure and authority coincided with the inherently different mission of USSOCOM, which was to "prepare SOF to carry out assigned missions and, if directed by the President or the Secretary of Defense, to plan for and conduct special operations."²¹ Included were the following organizational responsibilities:

- Develop SOF doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures.
- Conduct specialized courses of instruction for all SOF.
- Train assigned forces and ensure interoperability of equipment and forces.
- Monitor the preparedness of SOF assigned to other unified commands.
- Monitor the promotions, assignments, retention, training, and professional-development of all SOF personnel.
- Consolidate and submit program and budget proposals for Major Force Program-11 (MFP-11).
- Develop and acquire special operations-peculiar equipment, material, supplies, and services.²²

The USSOCOM mission statement evolved over the next fourteen years to reflect the increasing demand for SOF amidst the changing requirements of the global security situation. That mission gained a new fidelity and changed drastically after the events of 11 September 2001, when then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld appointed USSOCOM as the lead agency for "planning and synchronizing the Global War on Terror" (GWOT).²³

Despite a rapid evolution, and several adjustments in the command mission statement, USSOCOM remained steadfast in its unique identity and criteria for defining what Special Operations and Special Operations Forces actually are. These "SOF attributes" are focused

mainly on personnel whose combination of maturity, experience, specialized training and employment of unconventional tactics and equipment enable the application of techniques, technology, and judgment that are beyond the capabilities resident in conventional forces.²⁴ Additionally, the Department of Defense (DOD) defines Special Operations as "Operations conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to achieve military, diplomatic, informational, and/or economic objectives employing military capabilities for which there is no broad conventional force requirement" or capability.²⁵

SOF Unique Ethos

The focus on the individual is what sets SOF apart from all other organizations. The Marine Corps defines its ethos and key to warfighting success as the combined-arms maneuver team, where USSOCOM regards its greatest strength as their individuals:

The 21st century SOF Warrior—selectively recruited and assessed, mature, superbly trained and led—will remain the key to success in special operations. These warriors must be capable of conducting strategic operations in all tactical environments—combining a warrior ethos with language proficiency, cultural awareness, political sensitivity, and the ability to maximize Information Age technology. SOF must also have the intellectual agility to conceptualize creative, useful solutions to ambiguous problems, and provide a coherent set of choices to the Combatant Commanders or Joint Force Commander.²⁶

Another distinguishing facet of USSOCOM's philosophy and ethos is a set of general operating principles that guide all SOF actions from recruiting to operational employment. These guiding principles are referred to as the four "SOF Truths":

- (1) Humans are more important than hardware
- (2) Quality is better than quantity
- (3) Special operations forces cannot be mass-produced
- (4) Competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies arise²⁷

These operating principles are more than simple guidelines for SOF, they are doctrine. This particular warfighting philosophy highlights the very thought process used to approach and

subsequently solve battlefield problems. USSOCOM takes great pride in the immense degree of tactical and operational flexibility inherent to SOF. USSOCOM commanders and staff believe this flexibility, combined with unparalleled ingenuity and audacity, enables the command to approach and solve complex warfare problems with lighter, smaller, and more efficient unconventional solutions.

SOF Mission and Future Vision

The Secretary of Defense's designation of USSOCOM as the lead agency for GWOT has resulted in global deployment rates that have stretched the capabilities and structure of the command. In order to prevent mission creep, USSOCOM remains focused on the nine core special operations tasks outlined in Title 10, US Code. (See Fig-3)

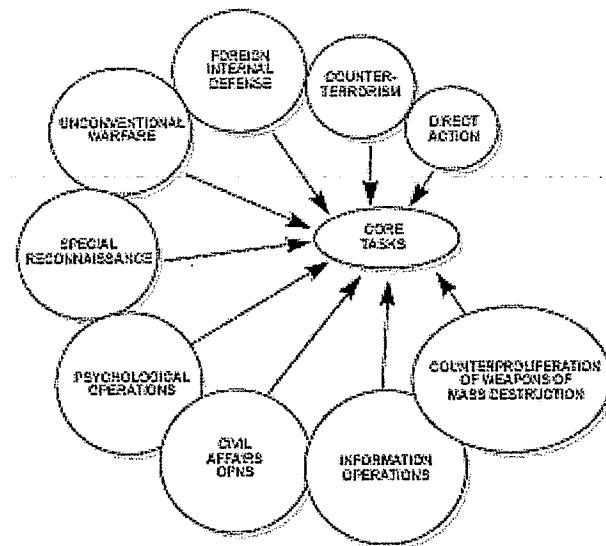


Figure – 3²⁸

USSOCOM's focus on the nine core tasks, combined with the operating principles outlined in the "SOF Truths," distinguish the command from the other services and COCOMs and preclude the possibility of overlap in either mission or capability. USSOCOM has staked its future and

relevance on the continued ability to apply highly skilled personnel against the strategic needs of the nation.²⁹

SOF Operational History

SOF has demonstrated repeatedly the effectiveness of their warfighting philosophy and ethos throughout history in numerous successful special operations missions spanning the spectrum of conflict. The following historical vignettes are presented in order to highlight situations in both early SOF history, and recent operations, where SOF warfighting methodology and doctrine would have been greatly enhanced by Marine warfighting doctrine. Both Operation EAGLE CLAW and Operation ANACONDA represent SOF specific operations that could have realized much greater degrees of success with the application of MAGTF doctrine.

Operation EAGLE CLAW

On 4 November 1979, a militant group of dissident Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Tehran and took fifty-two American citizens hostage. The seizure was in response to the United States' Iranian policy writ large and, specifically, the U.S. decision to admit the former Iranian Shah into the United States for medical treatment. After six months of failed negotiation attempts, President Jimmy Carter ordered the execution of a daring rescue attempt by US Special Forces, Operation EAGLE CLAW.³⁰

Operation EAGLE CLAW, often referred to as Desert One due to the name of the austere landing and refueling site in the Iranian desert, was an entirely joint plan, centered on a small assault force of elite SOF. The plan called for a night aviation infiltration of the force into a remote desert airstrip via U.S. Air Force C-130 transports from Oman, Jordan, and Marine CH-53 helicopters from the USS *Nimitz*. The force was then to conduct a helicopter infiltration to within fifty miles of Tehran and hide out until the next night cycle. The assault force would then

conduct a covert overland infiltration using US intelligence operatives to ferry the assault force into the objective area. The assault force was then to storm the embassy, free the hostages, and take them to a nearby soccer field for helicopter extract to Manzariyah Air Base, about 40 miles southeast of Tehran. Army Rangers would seize the airfield at Manzariyah, allowing the hostages and assaulters to board C-130s for extract out of Iran.³¹

Although the complex operation was diligently planned and thoroughly rehearsed at the individual unit level, execution was plagued with mishaps that resulted in tragedy. First, the mission required a minimum of six CH-53s. Of the eight launched from the USS Nimitz, only six arrived due to treacherous sand storm en-route to Desert One. With only six helicopters, the mission was at minimum go criteria when one of the helicopters was determined mission incapable for hydraulic issues. With only five CH-53s available, the mission had to be aborted, and that is when events took a turn for the worse. While attempting to extract, one of the CH-53s struck a C-130 on the taxiway of the desert airstrip. Both aircraft immediately burst into flames. In the end, the C-130 and CH-53 were destroyed, and the force incurred eight dead and four seriously wounded. The mission was a failure.³²

Eagle Claw has since been scrutinized countless times. In May of 1980, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) directed an official review of Eagle Claw by six senior officers from all service branches under Admiral James L. Holloway. The commission investigated every aspect of the mission from planning through execution, uncovered the factors contributing to the failure of the mission, and delivered multiple pointed recommendations to the CJCS. Of the many findings, the Holloway Report indicated that the "ad-hoc nature" of the task organization and command and control structure directly contributed to mission failure. Furthermore, the report recommended the formation of a Counter Terrorist Joint Task Force

(CJTF) with permanently assigned personnel and staff.³³ These recommendations, in addition to subsequent congressional legislation, directly resulted in the establishment of USSOCOM.

Operation ANACONDA

In the winter of 2001-2002, a relatively small footprint of SOF and elements of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) combined with Afghan militia fighters had liberated Afghanistan from the oppressive Taliban regime and were close on the heals of the global terrorist network - Al Qaeda.³⁴ In late December 2001 through early January 2002, SOF elements in Afghanistan believed they had narrowly missed the capture or killing of Osama Bin Laden, the elusive leader of Al-Qaeda, amidst the jagged peaks of Tora Bora.³⁵ Intelligence was indicating significant Al-Qaeda activity in an austere area called the Shah-i-Kot Valley, setting the stage for Operation Anaconda.³⁶ Anaconda would be the largest operation against Al-Qaeda since the inception of OEF, and has often been categorized as a resounding tactical success resulting in the death of "several hundred"³⁷ Al-Qaeda fighters; however, a deeper analysis uncovers critical failures in the command and control (C2) structure as well as a failure to develop a combined arms task organization for combat that probably prevented a greater degree of success.

Of the eight total U.S. deaths that occurred during Anaconda, seven occurred during fighting that occurred as a result of a decision to insert, and subsequently rescue, a SOF team on contentious terrain. These SOF actions were never fully coordinated with the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Commander due to the disjointed C2 structure in Operation ANACONDA.³⁸ In addition to the C2 problems, the plan for Anaconda did not take a combined arms approach to solving problems: Consequently, when faced with a more capable enemy force than assumed, US forces were required to make significant last minute adaptations. When the joint fixed-wing

air support proved insufficient and slow to respond, and the CJTF's limited organic mortar battery could not provide sufficient fire support, US Forces were forced to reach back to the United States and call up additional rotary winged fire support assets. This last minute adaptation was costly and demonstrated a failure of the planners to take a combined arms approach to organization for combat and make maximum use of the available joint assets already in theater.³⁹

The majority of the problems experienced in Operation Anaconda can be traced back to the failure of the commanders to foster both unity of command and unity of effort in joint planning and execution. This was a function of a fractured command and control environment that was originally designed to support smaller, autonomous, and distributed SOF operations. Collectively, these command failures and planning missteps limited the degree of success that Operation Anaconda may have realized.

A MAGTF Perspective

The difficulties experienced in Operations EAGLE CLAW and ANACONDA are not unique to SOF: they plague all combat forces. Operations EAGLE CLAW and ANACONDA failed to maximize the potential capabilities of the multi-disciplined joint force capabilities because they lacked the necessary integration and command relationships fostered by a combined arms task organization developed in training, planning, and execution. These same problems were at the forefront of the minds of the Marines who developed Marine doctrine, and are particularly germane to the way Marines fight. The MAGTF perspective to warfighting brings a viable solution to this common military problem. The MAGTF approach to maneuver warfare realizes its success not because of it is comprised of all functional components of a combined arms team, but because it fuses these elements into air-ground solutions that are

unified under a single commander's vision. The components have habitual relationships forged in training, planning, and execution that create a synergy much greater than the simple sum of the component parts. This synergy is the center of gravity of the Marine warfighting philosophy, and can readily be applied to USSOCOM as a viable Marine contribution.

USMC-SOCOM Integration

In addition to designating USSOCOM as the lead agency in GWOT, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also directed greater cooperation between the Marine Corps and USSOCOM.⁴⁰ In response, the Marine Corps reconstituted the USMC-SOCOM Board to determine the best method of achieving the Defense Secretary's intent. The result was the establishment and subsequent deployment of Marine Corps SOCOM (MCSOCOM) Detachment One (Det-1) as an experimental unit designed to test interoperability of Marine forces working directly for USSOCOM. Det-1 was a task organized unit built on MAGTF principles, with all warfighting functions (minus an aviation element) in a single formation. The experiment was a tactical success, with Marines rising to meet, and in some areas exceed, existing SOF standards. The prevailing sentiment across the spectrum of service members who served with Det-1 was that the uniquely Marine-MAGTF approach to solving unconventional warfare problems was both in consonance with SOF doctrine and was of significant additive value to USSOCOM.⁴¹

With the successful completion of the Det-1 experiment, the USMC-SOCOM Board concluded that a standing unit that was both COCOM to USSOCOM and capable of manning, training, equipping, and deploying forces in support of USSOCOM requirements was the solution. Marine Special Operations Forces Command (MARSOC) was formed as a result of this conclusion.⁴²

MARSOC Today

MARSOC rapidly developed from a concept into a fully operational command that began deploying Marines in support of USSOCOM requirements almost immediately. MARSOC is currently commanded by a Major General and is staffed with over 2500 Marines and Sailors. MARSOC is functionally organized to be completely compatible with USSOCOM organizational structure while remaining synchronized with the Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) staff. The command maintains a non-deploying headquarters, two Marine Special Operations Battalions (MSOBs), a Marine Special Operations Advisor Group (MSOAG), a Marine Special Operations Support Group (MSOSG), and a Marine Special Operations School (MSOS). The primary maneuver elements of MARSOC are the two MSOBs and the MSOAG.⁴³

Each of the two MSOBs is commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel and maintains a battalion headquarters and four Marine Special Operations Companies (MSOCs). The MSOC is currently the base element for MARSOC deployments. The individual MSOCs are commanded by Majors and are comprised of a small headquarters and three Marine Special Operations Teams (MSOTs). The fourteen-man MSOT is organized similar to the Army Special Forces thirteen-man Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) model. MSOTs are commanded by Captains and include Marines with specialized reconnaissance, weapons and tactics, and communications training, as well as two corpsmen with advanced medical certifications. A deploying MSOC is supplemented with additional intelligence, logistics, and specialty enablers from the MSOSG in accordance with mission requirements.⁴⁴

The MSOAG currently maintains two battalion-sized elements that are organized similar to the MSOB. Each of the two MSOAG battalions has three companies comprised of five teams. The MSOAG teams are also comprised of fourteen men, and are organized functionally with predominantly infantry Marines to conduct training of foreign military units. The team is the base deploying element of the MSOAG, which deploys in accordance with Geographic Combatant Commander (GCC) requirements.⁴⁵ MARSOC's adoption of task-organizations for the maneuver elements that are similar to the other service components of USSOCOM has reduced the initial frictions of interoperability and integration into the SOF community.

In accordance with the unique SOF ethos of employing thoroughly-vetted and highly-trained individuals, MARSOC has developed and implemented a rigorous selection and training process that is congruent to those in the other service components of USSOCOM. MARSOC Marines are individually screened and assessed during a demanding Recruitment Selection and Assessment Stage (RSAS) where candidates are vetted thoroughly to ensure they meet the high standards demanded of the SOF operator. Once selected, the Marines and Sailors undergo an arduous Individual Training Course (ITC) that provides basic through advanced skill set training. Only upon completion of ITC is an individual assigned to a deployable team.⁴⁶ These processes serve to close the cultural and ethos gaps between the Marines and SOF, and have proven effective at the individual level.

MARSOC has further bridged the institutional gaps between the Marine Corps and SOF by ensuring that all deploying elements undergo a theater and mission specific unit training and certification phase prior to deployment. This pre-deployment training phase, or workup, includes intensive cultural and language training in addition to focused unit level skills training, evaluation, and certification. This workup ensures the deploying elements of MARSOC have

been thoroughly-manned, trained, equipped, and evaluated to accomplish the spectrum of missions required by the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) Commander.

Additionally, this workup period ensures the deploying unit is completely interoperable with all elements of the JSOTF.⁴⁷

Recent deployments of MARSOC elements in support of USSOCOM operations in GWOT have demonstrated that MARSOC has effectively closed the institutional gaps between the Marines and SOF. The newly formed Marine SOF elements have been integral in the successful execution of multiple operations ranging from Foreign Internal Defense (FID) missions in the Philippines, to Special Reconnaissance (SR) and Direct Action (DA) missions in Afghanistan. The Marines have adeptly displayed the ability to adopt the SOF ethos and provide a competent additive capability to USSOCOM.⁴⁸

MARSOC has proven capable of replicating current SOF capabilities, but in doing so, the Marines are subjected to the same limitations. During the recent MARSOC deployments, leaders have voiced concern about the lack of integrated aviation assets. The Marines have grown accustomed to organic aviation support that is integrated from the planning and preparation phases of an operation through execution. The MARSOC units deployed in support of USSOCOM have not enjoyed that same level of combined arms aviation support they enjoyed as part of a MAGTF. The assets available to the CJSOTF have not demonstrated the same habitual relationships or coordination the Marines have always known. These concerns reflect the same problems SOF experienced in Operations EAGLE CLAW and ANACONDA. The lack of organic aviation elements has hampered the realization of the full potential of a Marine force contribution.⁴⁹

A MAGTF Solution

Despite the solid efforts and recent successes of the Marines and staff of MARSOC to close the distance between the two organizations and to produce the most competent, capable, and relevant force possible, there remains a striking void in the current MARSOC task organization: the absence of an ACE. Without a dedicated aviation element incorporated into the MARSOC task organization, USSOCOM is not realizing the full potential of the Marine contribution. If the Marine Corps is truly dedicated to providing a viable capability to USSOCOM that represents the Corps best effort, the contribution will be a complete MAGTF.

Marine doctrine is unambiguous in its delineation of how Marine units operate; they fight as functional, combined arms MAGTFs. "If a MAGTF is deprived of a part of its combat forces, accomplishment of the mission for which it is tailored is jeopardized."⁵⁰ Marines operating as an integral component of the greater SOF structure are quickly going to find themselves training, planning, and executing among the same ad-hoc task organizations that have prevented the SOF community from achieving greater degrees of tactical and operational success in past operations such as EAGLE CLAW and ANACONDA. The true value of a uniquely Marine contribution is denuded by depriving MARSOC of an essential ingredient to the Marine recipe for warfighting.

The addition of an aviation component to MARSOC is no simple task; it will no doubt involve a dedicated effort, at nearly every level of command, to find innovative methods to dedicate assets from an already over-tasked and finite pool of resources. A similar situation applied to the relatively finite pool of trained Reconnaissance Marines required to stand up MARSOC initially. Manning MARSOC with fully trained Reconnaissance Marines seemed an unattainable goal to many, and there was an overwhelming swell of institutional resistance from not only the Reconnaissance community but from nearly every component of Manpower,

Training and Education Command, and the Operating Force Commanders who were in immediate need of additional assets. At the end of the day, the SECDEF and the Commandant tasked those involved with finding and implementing a workable solution. The result is the current MARSOC. When commanders sequester solutions from their subordinate commanders and staffs, they do not ask for the easiest solutions, they demand the best solutions regardless of the degree of difficulty.

In addition to the obvious benefits USSOCOM gleans from a complete MAGTF contribution, the Marine Corps stands to reap tangible rewards as well. The significant conventional force deployments in support of OEF and OIF will eventually subside, and the national strategy emphasis will once again focus on maximum gain from minimum force deployments. USSOCOM will inevitably play a significant role in the countering of emerging global threats. Having a full MAGTF complement in USSOCOM will guarantee Marines across the spectrum of disciplines will remain engaged in arenas they would otherwise not have access to. Having full MAGTF representation in USSOCOM also enables both ground and aviation occupational specialties to capitalize on the extensive SOF resources for tactical innovation and exploitation of emerging technologies. The immediate costs of contributing a full MAGTF capability to USSOCOM may seem prohibitive now, but a longer-term view of the problem reveals real benefit for both USSOCOM and the Marine Corps.

Conclusion

When General Jones announced his decision to make an earnest force contribution to USSOCOM, he did so recognizing the Marines would bring with them profound benefits in the form of their warfighting ethos. The Marines bring an expeditionary combined arms warfighting philosophy that produces results far greater than the simple sum of the component parts. A

warfighting ethos and doctrine that directly combats the kind of internal friction that stems from a lack of unity of command and unity of effort. The Marines bring the MAGTF. General Jones also understood that USSOCOM held attributes and access to a degree of tactical and technical expertise the Marines could not independently realize. The Commandant's vision also reflected a long view of the future for both the Marine Corps and USSOCOM.

The MARSOC of today has made great strides towards the accomplishment of its assigned mission by organizing, training, equipping, and deploying Marine Special Operations Forces with organization and capabilities complimentary to SOF. The current organization of MARSOC; however, does not maximize the true strength of a Marine Corps force contribution to USSOCOM. The strength of the Marine contribution is not in the duplication of existing SOF structure and capabilities, but in the development and employment of the MAGTF. In order to realize the full potential of Marine forces in SOF, the Marine Corps must make MARSOC a complete MAGTF. Failing to provide an aviation element to MARSOC strips the unit of its ability to effectively translate Marine warfighting doctrine and ethos into practical execution. Additionally, failing to provide a complete MAGTF forces the Marines to succumb to the same constraints that limited the degree of tactical success of Operations Eagle Claw and Anaconda. The contribution of a full MAGTF to USSOCOM is not only the appropriate solution for the betterment of the Marine Corps and USSOCOM but also it is the right answer for the good of the nation.

Notes

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²³ Ibid., 14.

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